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Finding the right homework spot



Rick Wood

Dominic Scanlan, a third-grader, writes in his notebook in his home study area, formerly a closet.

Giving your child space for schoolwork helps aid academic achievement

By [Jan Uebelherr](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Third grader Dominic Scanlan figures his homework station has everything he needs. After all, he put it together himself.

He decided that an unused nook under a staircase would be the perfect spot for him to work. He cleaned it, moved an old desk there, put up art and equipped it: pencils, paper, some favorite seashells, napkins (he sometimes eats dessert at his desk) and a set of tinted goggles "in case I want to see something in different colors," said Dominic, 8.

"He calls it his office. Sometimes he calls it his laboratory," said his father, Martin Scanlan, assistant professor of education at Marquette University. "If we would have said, 'Dominic, this is your office,' it would have been much different."

The making of Dominic's office illustrates the cardinal rule of a kid's homework station, says his father: Get a kid involved in creating that homework space.

As kids head back to school, parents naturally want to pave the way for success - and a place to do homework is a piece of the puzzle.

"What you're trying to do is facilitate their learning," said Scanlan, who has been an elementary school teacher and an administrator. Kids are more likely to learn when they're involved and connected, and that extends to their work space, he said.

Dominic is happy with his homework nook: He's been writing and working on math since the middle of August. The coolest part about his office-laboratory? That's easy: "I like it because it's my own."

Here are some tips on mapping out a great homework space, with help from the Scanlans as well as Heather Weyda, a pediatric occupational therapist at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, and Amy Kazilsky, director of education at the Betty Brinn Children's Museum.

- **Dedicate the space.** A child doesn't necessarily need a desk. There's nothing wrong with the kitchen table, Scanlan said. "But you need to do something to set that space apart. Maybe it's a special placemat for homework time, or a little divider. I think the essential quality is it's dedicated space to learning."
- **Dedicate the time.** "A set time to do homework is as essential as a set place," Kazilsky said via e-mail. "Establish a daily routine. Children need and thrive on schedules."
- **Tone it down.** Though a few kids may work well with some background noise, in general, it's a good idea to keep things quiet. "As a basic rule, you want to create a focused environment for learning," Scanlan said. "Having the TV on or a lot of other things going on, younger children around, is going to be a distraction."
- **Stock it.** Make a list of necessary supplies - No. 2 pencils, pencil sharpener, erasers, lined paper,

stapler, ruler, safety scissors - so the child isn't constantly getting up and searching for essentials. Kazilsky suggests helping a child put together a "homework kit." This is especially helpful if the kitchen table is the work space. The homework kit can be stored when not in use.

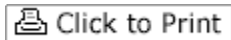
- **Show off accomplishments.** If space permits, put up a bulletin board where prized work can be displayed, Kazilsky said.
- **Make it easy to monitor.** The homework spot needs to be easily accessible so that parents can check in and make sure the child is on track, not distracted and not surfing on a computer instead of studying. "You want the design so that it's not a big chore for you to see them and get feedback, keep them on task," Scanlan said.
- **Make it fit.** "More times than not, the desk is too high," Weyda said. "If the arms are out in a winged position, or shoulders are hiked up, then the desk is too high. The desk top should be 1 to 2 inches higher than the bent elbow." As for the chair, the child's feet should be flat on the floor when he or she is seated. If they're not, use a shoe box or foot stool.
- **Let them move.** Learning doesn't have to happen while a child is seated at a desk. "You might want to take a walk while reviewing the spelling words, or play catch," Scanlan said.

Give a child "opportunities to move," such as allowing them to lie on the floor to read, Weyda said. "Kids are kids. We can't expect them to sit for unreasonable hours." Figure on a break every 30 minutes, she said.

- **Limit screen time.** Whether it's a computer or TV screen, Weyda says it should be limited to two hours a day. When kids are working at a computer, they should have a two-minute break every 20 to 30 minutes.
- **Listen to Dominic.** His advice for any kid wanting to create a homework space: "Just make it your own, and then you will like it."

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